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Transitioning to Afghan-Led Counterinsurgency

SETH G. JONES

CT-361

May 2011

Testimony presented before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on May 10, 2011

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The RAND Corporation

Transitioning to Afghan-Led Counterinsurgency²

**Before the Committee on Foreign Relations
United States Senate**

May 10, 2011

The death of Osama bin Laden and the upcoming tenth anniversary of the U.S. involvement in Afghanistan have triggered several important policy issues. This testimony poses several questions. What should the U.S. objectives be in Afghanistan? Based on these objectives, what are America's military options (and what would the implications be for transition)? Finally, what are the political options, including the possibility of a peace settlement?

I argue that U.S. objectives in Afghanistan should be tied to narrow U.S. national security interests, and the U.S. military strategy should transition to an *Afghan-led counterinsurgency strategy*. This strategy would involve decreasing the U.S. military footprint and relying on an increasingly prominent role of U.S. Special Operations Forces to help Afghans conduct counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations. It would require assisting Afghan national and local forces degrade the insurgency and target terrorist leaders. Implementing this strategy would require decreasing the U.S. military footprint to perhaps 30,000 or fewer forces by 2014 and surging Afghan National Security Forces and Afghan Local Police. It would also include leveraging U.S. Special Operations Forces, CIA, and some conventional forces to conduct several tasks: train, equip, and advise Afghan National Security Forces; assist local communities improve security and governance from the bottom up (especially the Afghan Local Police and Village Stability Operations programs); conduct direct action operations against high value targets; provide a range of "enablers," such as intelligence, civil affairs, and military information support operations.

There are several ways for the United States to achieve its limited objectives in Afghanistan. The first is if al Qa'ida is destroyed in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region and no longer poses a serious threat to the U.S. homeland. The second is if the Taliban breaks ties with al Qa'ida. The third is if Afghan National Security Forces and local allies (such as Afghan Local Police) can sufficiently

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degrade the insurgency and prevent the return of the Taliban with minimal outside assistance. At the moment, the United States should pursue all three means *simultaneously* – targeting al Qa’ida and its allies, political negotiations, and Afghan-led counterinsurgency – until one of them, alone or in combination with the others, adequately achieves core U.S. objectives.

I. Objectives in Afghanistan

The U.S. objectives in Afghanistan should be *limited* and tied to narrow U.S. national security interests. They include:

- Disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qa’ida and allied groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan that threaten the U.S. homeland and its interests overseas
- Deny al Qa’ida and its allies a safe haven and an ally in Afghanistan that threaten the U.S. homeland and its interests overseas

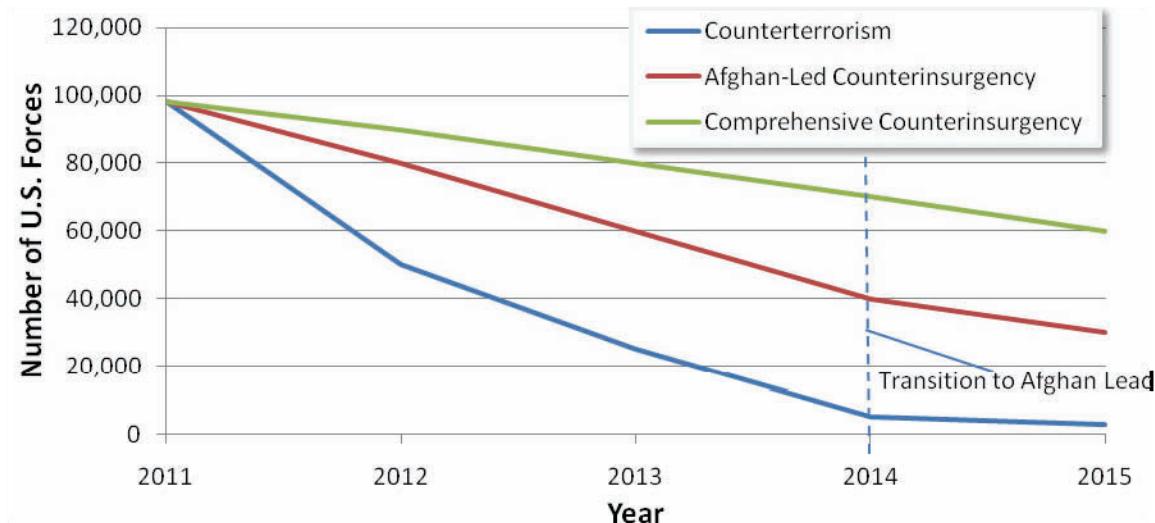
As illustrated on September 11, 2001, Afghanistan was not just a sanctuary for al Qa’ida, but the Taliban was an ally. There were disagreements between Taliban and al Qa’ida leaders, as there are between most organizations. But Osama bin Laden’s decision in the late 1990s to move from Tora Bora to Kandahar, only a few miles from Mullah Omar’s residence, and the Taliban’s refusal to hand over bin Laden after September 11 indicated a viable relationship. Today, the United States cannot accept a situation in which al Qa’ida and its local allies have a sanctuary to plan and train for terrorist attacks against the U.S. homeland. Nor can the United States accept an Afghan government that is an ally of terrorists. Al Qa’ida’s continuing relationship with senior Taliban, Haqqani, and other militant leaders – including the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan and Lashkar-e Tayyiba – suggests that a Taliban-led government would be a risky gamble for U.S. national security. A precipitous U.S. withdrawal and continuing Pakistan support to Afghan insurgent groups could certainly lead to Taliban control of part or most of Afghanistan over the next decade.

II. Military Options

To achieve these limited objectives, there are several possible military options: (1) counterterrorism, (2) comprehensive counterinsurgency, and (3) Afghan-led counterinsurgency. All come with risks and benefits. They involve different strategies and require different force levels. Figure 1 outlines possible U.S. force levels over the next five years. They vary in several respects – including their overall strategy, the number of forces required for 2014, and the slope of the curve in reducing U.S. forces. These levels are meant to be illustrative. Actual planning would

need to be based on a more fine-grained analysis of unit deployments, conditions on the ground, performance of Afghanistan national and local forces, and other factors.

Figure 1: Example of U.S. Force Reductions, 2011-2015



1. Counterterrorism: The first is a counterterrorism strategy. While there are several variants of this strategy, most agree on quickly withdrawing all – or most – military forces from Afghanistan and relying on U.S. Special Operations Forces and CIA units to capture or kill al Qa'ida and other terrorists that threaten the U.S. homeland and its interests abroad. It would involve rapidly decreasing the number of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, leaving between several hundred and several thousand Special Operations Forces and CIA personnel to conduct direct action missions. The U.S. footprint in Afghanistan might more closely resemble the current U.S. footprint in Yemen: lean and lethal. In addition, a counterterrorism strategy would also require a range of support elements such as intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets; air support for combat patrol, close air support, and other missions; and perhaps a small number of conventional forces for logistics and force protection.

This strategy has the benefit of significantly decreasing the financial burden on the United States, minimizing the deaths of American soldiers, and allowing the United States to focus on other areas of the world where it may have strategic interests. The death of Osama bin Laden has already increased calls for such an approach.

But a counterterrorism strategy has several risks which likely outweigh its benefits. A rapid and large-scale withdrawal of U.S. forces reaffirms the regional perception that the United States is not a reliable ally. More importantly, a rapid U.S. withdrawal would fail to address the elimination

of a sanctuary where al Qa'ida and its allies can reside. It treats the symptom and not the underlying disease. Indeed, a counterterrorism strategy would likely increase Pakistan's impetus to support the Taliban and other insurgent groups as a bulwark against a perceived Indian-Afghan axis in Afghanistan. The possibility of a Taliban victory in Afghanistan has serious risks since al Qa'ida leaders, including Ayman al-Zawahiri, Abu Yahya al-Libi, and Ilyas Kashmiri, retain an active relationship with senior Taliban and Haqqani Network leaders. Osama bin Laden would not have been killed if the United States had been unable to operate in Afghanistan. In the future, the United States will only be able to stay in Afghanistan if the Taliban is prevented from re-taking power.

The United States should have learned its lesson from September 11, 2001: the Taliban would likely allow a range of terrorist groups to operate and train on its soil. Some of these groups, such as al Qa'ida, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, and Lashkar-e Tayyiba, present a threat to the U.S. homeland. Indeed, on May 1, 2010, Faisal Shahzad, who was trained in Pakistan by Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan bomb-makers, packed his Nissan Pathfinder with explosives and drove into Times Square in New York City on a congested Saturday night. Only fortune intervened, since the improvised explosive device malfunctioned.

Some have argued that al Qa'ida operatives primarily reside in Pakistan, not Afghanistan. But the 1,519-mile border, drawn up in 1893 by Sir Henry Mortimer Durand, the British Foreign Secretary of India, is largely irrelevant for militant groups. Locals regularly cross the border to trade, pray at mosques, visit relatives, and – in some cases – target NATO and coalition forces. Indeed, al Qa'ida migration patterns since the anti-Soviet jihad show frequent movement in both directions. Osama bin Laden established al Qa'ida in Peshawar, Pakistan in 1988, though he and other Arab fighters crossed the border into Afghanistan regularly to fight Soviet forces and support the mujahedeen. When bin Laden returned to the area in 1996 from Sudan, he settled near Jalalabad in eastern Afghanistan and later moved south to Kandahar Province. After the overthrow of the Taliban regime, however, most of the al Qa'ida leadership moved back to Pakistan, though some settled in neighboring Iran. This tendency to find safe havens in both Afghanistan and Pakistan will likely continue.

Based on historical patterns, al Qa'ida and other groups would almost certainly increase their presence in Afghanistan in a Taliban-run Afghanistan. A counterterrorism strategy will unlikely prevent this outcome, especially if Pakistan continues to back the Taliban and other insurgent groups.

2. Comprehensive Counterinsurgency: The second option would require keeping a fairly large U.S. military footprint in Afghanistan to conduct what some U.S. government assessments refer to as “comprehensive, population-centric counterinsurgency operations.”³ As outlined in the U.S. Department of Defense’s *Report on Progress toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, the goal would be fairly broad: to protect the Afghan people, neutralize insurgent networks, develop Afghan National Security Forces, and support the establishment of legitimate governance and sustainable socio-economic institutions. This strategy is most consistent with conventional counterinsurgency theories.⁴ It would likely require continuing to keep fairly robust levels of American forces in Afghanistan through 2014, perhaps up to 60,000 U.S. soldiers, depending on conditions on the ground and other factors. These forces would continue to engage in combat operations, as well as train, equip, and advise Afghan forces.

But a comprehensive counterinsurgency approach has risks. To begin with, it is probably not sustainable over the long run in Afghanistan or the United States. In Afghanistan, it does not adequately prepare Afghan national and local forces to fight the insurgency and secure their country. Afghan support for the U.S. military has declined every year since 2005, though it is still above 50 percent.⁵ American support for the war has also been declining. As discussed in the next section, a range of initiatives – including the Afghan Local Police program – have shown serious potential, indicating that Afghans are willing to take the lead in counterinsurgency operations. In fact, large numbers of U.S. forces will likely inhibit the ability of Afghan forces to operate effectively, since most continue to use international forces as a crutch.

3. Afghan-Led Counterinsurgency: A third option would be to transition toward an Afghan-led counterinsurgency strategy that relies on a limited Special Operations Force footprint, aided by the CIA and a reduced number of conventional forces. On the military side, it would focus on two goals: (1) assist Afghan national and local forces degrade the insurgency and (2) target terrorist leaders. It is different from the counterterrorism strategy because it relies on U.S. Special Operations Forces and others to conduct counterterrorism *and counterinsurgency*. And it is different than comprehensive counterinsurgency because it would largely terminate U.S. combat operations by 2014 except for targeting terrorist leaders. An Afghan-led counterinsurgency strategy would involve using U.S. forces to conduct several tasks:

³ U.S. Department of Defense, *Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan and United States Plan for Sustaining the Afghan National Security Forces* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, April 2011).

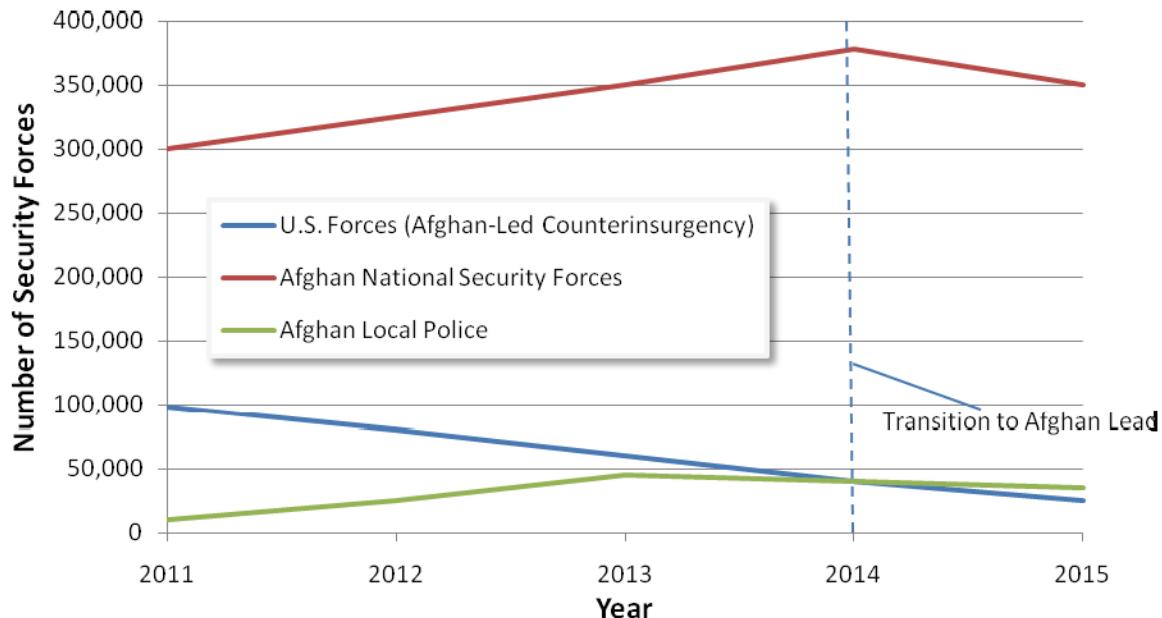
⁴ U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps, *Counterinsurgency*, FM 3-24, MCWP 3-33.5 (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army and Headquarters Marine Corps Combat Development Command (December 2006).

⁵ ABC News, BBC, ARD, Washington Post, “Afghanistan: Where Things Stand,” December 6, 2010.

- Train, equip, and advise Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police forces (top-down counterinsurgency)
- Assist local communities improve security, governance, and development – including through village-level community forces such as Afghan Local Police (bottom-up counterinsurgency)
- Conduct direct action operations against high value targets (counterterrorism)
- Provide a range of “enablers,” such as intelligence, civil affairs, and military information support operations

This strategy would require decreasing the number of U.S. forces to perhaps 30,000 by 2014, depending on ground conditions and other factors. As illustrated in Figure 2, it would also require a robust Afghan National Security Force and Afghan Local Police presence for the near term, which could then decrease as security conditions improved. One of the critical parts of this strategy is supporting growth of the Afghan Local Police, a “bottom-up” component of the campaign plan that allows Afghan communities to stand up for themselves. The Afghan Local Police program, which was established in August 2010 by President Karzai, has undermined Taliban control in Helmand, Kandahar, Oruzgan, and other provinces by helping villagers protect their communities and better connecting them to district and provincial government. Despite some off-kilter media reports, the Afghan government and NATO forces have been fairly meticulous in choosing locations where locals have already resisted the Taliban, vetting candidates using biometrics and available intelligence, and training and mentoring local villagers. They've also helped ensure Afghan Local Police are small, defensive entities under the supervision of local shuras and the control of the Ministry of Interior.

Figure 2: Example of Force Numbers for Afghan-Led Counterinsurgency

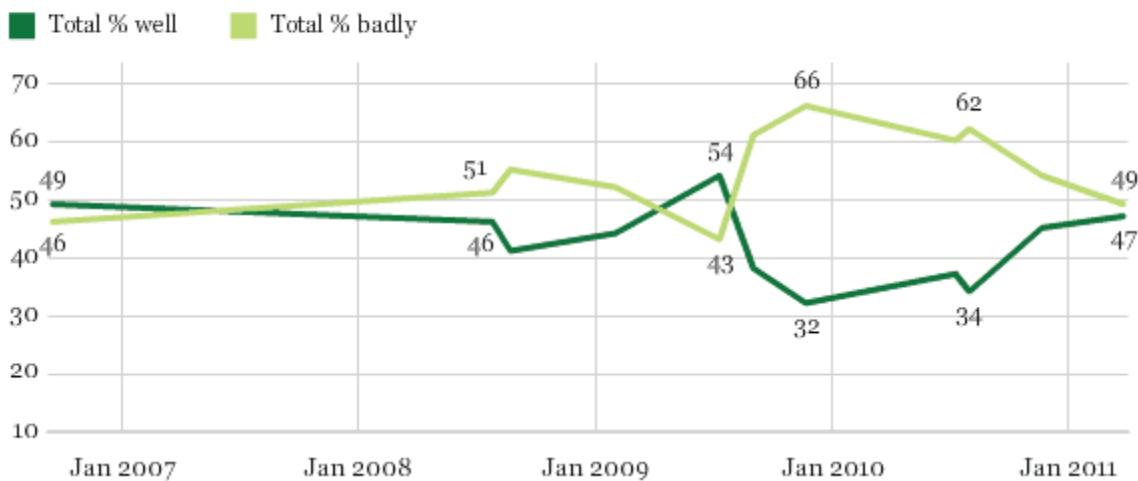


This strategy entails some risks. It assumes that Afghan National Security Forces and local allies, with assistance from U.S. Special Operations Forces and others, would be adequate to degrade the Taliban-led insurgency. Along with the comprehensive counterinsurgency strategy, it also assumes that Afghan central government institutions would be adequate to establish order and deliver services, at least in key urban areas. Current levels of corruption and incompetence raise long-term governance concerns. Finally, a lower U.S. footprint risks backsliding if Afghan National Security Forces and Afghan Local Police fail to degrade the insurgency.

But the Afghan-led counterinsurgency strategy has several benefits. It relies on Afghans to do the bulk of counterinsurgency, but with U.S. assistance and oversight. It also ensures a steady drop in financial costs of the war, though not at counterterrorism levels. At its core, it would involve a combination of top-down and bottom-up efforts. There is good reason to believe an Afghan-led counterinsurgency strategy could degrade the Taliban and other insurgent groups. U.S. intelligence assessments have indicated that the Taliban and its allies have lost control of some territory over the past year in the south, the Taliban's center of gravity. One of the primary reasons, according to several of these assessments, has been the introduction of Afghan Local Police and Village Stability Operations. In addition, a growing number of Americans believe the war is now going well, as illustrated in Figure 3. Now is not the time to abandon this promising effort.

Figure 3: American Perceptions of the War in Afghanistan⁶

In general, how would you say things are going for the U.S. in Afghanistan -- [very well, moderately well, moderately badly, (or) very badly]?



III. Political Options

In addition to military options, there are also important political options. Some have argued that a political settlement to the conflict is critical to peace in Afghanistan. Peace negotiations would be desirable if they succeeded in a settlement. Opinion polls show high levels of support within Afghan society for a negotiated settlement, and a willingness to bring Taliban members back into the fold, though not to run the country. When asked who they would rather have ruling Afghanistan today, 86 percent of Afghans said the Karzai government and only 9 percent the Taliban, according to a December 2010 poll by ABC News, BBC, ARD, and the Washington Post. When asked who posed the biggest danger in the country, 64 percent of respondents said the Taliban, up from 41 percent in 2005.⁷

But there are good reasons to be skeptical of a political settlement, at least in the short-term. First, insurgencies often end with a military victory by one side, rather than a peace settlement. According to one study, military victory was the primary reason why civil wars and insurgencies ended between the 1940s and 1990s, though peace settlements became more common in the

⁶ Gallup, "Americans Divided on How Things Are Going in Afghanistan," April 8, 2011.

⁷ ABC News, BBC, ARD, Washington Post, "Afghanistan: Where Things Stand," December 6, 2010.

1990s and 2000s.⁸ According to another study, of the roughly 55 wars fought for control of a central government (as opposed to secession or regional autonomy) since 1955, 75 percent ended with a clear victory for one side. The government crushed the rebels in at least 40 percent of the cases, while the rebels won control of the center in 35 percent. Power-sharing agreements that divide up control of a central government among the combatants have been far less common.⁹ This has been particularly true in Afghanistan – including during the 1990s – where peace efforts brokered by the United Nations failed in Afghanistan.

Second, a fairly robust body of research has found that several conditions present in Afghanistan make it difficult to establish a peace settlement. These conditions include a long history of conflict, the absence of a perceived winner, and geographic contiguity.¹⁰ In addition, the ideological vision of Taliban leaders, which is based on an extreme interpretation of Deobandi Islam, is likely incompatible with that of the Karzai government and most Afghans. It's not difficult to see why the Taliban is unpopular. The group subscribes to a radical interpretation of Sunni Islam established in Deoband, India, in 1867. In the 1990s, the Taliban closed cinemas and banned music, along with almost every other conceivable kind of entertainment. Most Afghans don't subscribe to their religious zealotry, which the founders of Deobandism wouldn't even recognize.

Third, a peace settlement with the Taliban runs the risk of escalating conflict with Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara, and anti-Taliban Pashtuns in Afghanistan. Many current and former leaders, including former head of the National Directorate of Security Amrullah Saleh, have expressed alarm about a peace settlement. Such a settlement could trigger a military build-up among northern commanders, such as Atta Mohammad Nur, Abdul Rashid Dostum, and Mohammad Fahim, causing the war's center of gravity to shift north. Indeed, reports indicate that northern commanders are already discussing a military build-up if there is a settlement with the Taliban.

In the end, however, the benefits of continuing peace negotiations outweigh the costs – even if negotiations fail. The U.S. demonstrated during the Cold War that direct dialogue with the Soviet Union could be helpful in passing information (including threats) and correcting misinformation. It may also cause fissures within insurgent ranks between those who support – and those who oppose – settlement talks. Negotiations with the Taliban and other insurgent groups should be supported, even if the probability of a settlement is low.

⁸ Monica Duffy Toft, *Securing the Peace: The Durable Settlement of Civil Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

⁹ James D. Fearon, "Iraq's Civil War," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 86, No. 2, March / April 2007, p. 8.

¹⁰ Virginia Page Fortna, *Peace Time: Cease-Fire Agreements and the Durability of Peace* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

IV. Additional Factors

At least three additional factors are critical over the long run, regardless of which strategy is pursued. The first is sustainability. The key is analyzing what needs to occur to make key economic sectors sustainable – or somewhat sustainable – without massive foreign resources. Some economists are concerned about the potential for a recession in Afghanistan when the international funding flow from the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) decreases. This would not be a result of declining development aid, but rather a decrease of services from ISAF activity. How can security costs be sustainable – or at least partly sustainable – by the Afghan government? How can the United States help the Afghan government grow its revenue and productive sectors to help pay for services, investment, and security? There are several options that should be more effectively implemented. Examples include long-term development of a mining sector that offers substantial benefits from Afghanistan's virtually untapped deposits of iron, copper, cobalt, gold, and critical industrial metals like lithium. In the shorter term, there should be an emphasis on artisanal projects and a shift from illegal artisanal mining to legal small-scale mining operations.

The second is good governance. To maintain and build legitimacy, the central government and local institutions need to more adequately provide justice and service delivery to the population, including countering high levels of corruption. How much is sufficient? In addition, how much legitimacy, order, and justice should come from the central government as opposed to informal government in rural areas? A key part of governance will be relaxing Western notions that stability must come only from the top down. Power has generally come from the bottom up in Afghanistan, especially in Pashtun areas of the country, the focus of today's insurgency. It is striking that when considering Afghanistan's recent history, U.S. policymakers often turn to the failed military exploits of the British or Soviet Union. A stronger focus needs to be placed on understanding what factors have contributed to Afghanistan's stable periods. The Musahiban dynasty, which ruled Afghanistan from 1929 to 1978, was one of the most stable periods in modern Afghan history, partly because the Musahibans understood the importance of local power. While they established a strong army and competent government technocrats, they also allowed a number of rural areas to police their own villages and establish rule of law through local shuras (councils). This model has a range of lessons for today.

The third factor is Pakistan. The failure to eliminate the insurgent sanctuary in Pakistan will cripple long-term efforts to stabilize Afghanistan. Every successful insurgency in Afghanistan

since 1979 has enjoyed a sanctuary in Pakistan and assistance from individuals within the Pakistan government, including the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI). Today, the Taliban and other insurgent groups enjoy a sanctuary in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and Baluchistan Province. Insurgent groups regularly ship arms, ammunition, and supplies into Afghanistan from Pakistan. Many suicide bombers come from Afghan refugee camps located in Pakistan, and improvised explosive device components are often smuggled across the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and assembled at safe houses in such provinces as Kandahar. The leadership structure of most insurgent groups (such as Taliban, Hezb-i-Islami, and the Haqqani Network) is based in Pakistan. Finally, elements within the Pakistan government, including the ISI, continue to provide support to such groups as the Taliban and Haqqani Network.

Pakistan and the United States have failed to target the insurgent sanctuary in Pakistan, especially in Baluchistan Province. Pakistan Army and Frontier Corps forces have conducted operations in Pakistan's tribal areas to the north, and the United States has conducted numerous drone strikes there. But relatively little has been done in Baluchistan. The United States and Pakistan must target Taliban leaders in Baluchistan. The most obvious way is to conduct clandestine raids to capture Taliban leaders in Baluchistan; large-scale military force would be unnecessary and counterproductive. Most Taliban are in or near cities like Quetta and Karachi. These operations should be led by police and intelligence agencies, much like Pakistani-American efforts to capture Khalid Shaikh Mohammed and other al Qa'ida operatives after September 11. In response, the United States could support Pakistan efforts to stabilize Baluchistan and defeat Baluch insurgents, a long-term goal of the Pakistan government.

What was mentioned at the beginning of this testimony bears repeating. Despite a range of difficult issues, there are several ways that the United States can achieve its objectives in Afghanistan. The first is if al Qa'ida is destroyed in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region and no longer poses a serious threat to the U.S. homeland. The second is if the Taliban breaks ties with al Qa'ida and other groups that threaten the U.S. homeland. The third is if Afghan National Security Forces and local allies (such as Afghan Local Police) can sufficiently degrade the insurgency and prevent the return of the Taliban with minimal foreign assistance. At the moment, the United States should pursue all three means *simultaneously* – targeting al Qa'ida, negotiations with the Taliban, and Afghan-led counterinsurgency – until one of them, alone or in combination with the others, achieves adequate results.